

Aruba Produces Aloes For the World's Needs

From the period of Alexander the Great in 333 B. C. to modern medical practice in 1941 A. D. stretches the long history of aloes, and for over 50 years the most important part in that history has been played by Aruba, which, with an area less than that of Manhattan island, exports approximately 78 per cent of the total world's supply of aloes.

Although they are one of the oldest natural sources for medicinals, aloes are grown on a commercial scale in but few places besides Aruba. With the exception of several parts of western Africa, Venezuela, and the neighboring islands of Curaçao and Bonaire, which together produce the balance of world supply, they are grown commercially nowhere else in the world.

Before the present war began, three-fourths of Aruba's aloes were sold to manufacturers of pharmaceuticals in the United States, and the remainder was shipped to England and, in lesser quantities, to Europe. For many years prior to the first World War, aloes gum was often shipped in hollow gourds of various sizes containing from one to five pounds. Most of this trade was with the Balkan states, where farmers bought a gourd at a time, and fed the unrefined gum to their stock as a purgative. In addition to medicinal products, aloes yield picric, oxalic, and other acids.

An exchange exists for the sale and purchase of raw aloes gum and its refined derivative aloin much like those for other commodities in world commerce, and market prices fluctuate according to supply and demand. Over 595,000 pounds of the raw gum was exported from Aruba during 1937, destined principally for conversion to an ingredient for cathartics. Aloes gum in 1938 was quoted at a price ranging from 30 to 35 cents Dutch per pound, although it has been known to fall as low as six cents per pound due to bumper crops. In 1940 the price rose as high as 70 cents.

Aloes were first brought to Aruba in 1864 by Governor Ferguson. In the course of extensive travels, the Governor had seen the aloes industry in parts of Africa, and he observed that the climate there was similar to that in Aruba. He imported the first plants from the island of Socotora, on the west African coast, and cultivated them in an experimental garden on the outskirts of Oranjestad. This place still bears the name "Socotora".

Aruba's aloes (one of over 100 known

Aloes Harvest is Now in Progress



Shown above is the method of harvesting aloes. The plants are sliced off near the ground and placed cut-end down in a tilted wooden trough, allowing the juice to drain into a tin can at the lower end.



Shown at right is a typical furnace for boiling the water out of the juice. The workman is stirring one of the large copper pots.

species) have spread over much of the island almost solely from the natural propagation of the plants. The proper amount of tropic sunshine, cool nights, and intermittent rains during three months of the year combine to make them thrive, with little or no cultivation beyond periodic removal of moisture-absorbing weeds from the fields. They are ruggedly strong plants averaging 12 inches in height and growing in a cluster of thick, juice-filled leaves with sharp tips and spined edges. At long intervals flowers appear on the plants, but do not produce seeds for propagation, reproduction being effected by means of new plants sprouting from shoots put out at the bottom of the cluster.

During the harvest season, from March to October, the leaves are cut near the base of the plant. Care must be taken to cut them at an angle, as improper cutting results in the plant's dying. Placed cut end down in tilted

wooden troughs, the stalks exude their thick, strong-smelling juice, which is dripped from the lower end of the trough into a receptacle. Collected in the fields by boys on donkeys, this lemon-yellow juice is carried to a central shed where it is stored in large vats or drums. In early times the water content of the fresh juice was evaporated simply by pouring the liquid into large, shallow, open pans and allowing it to set. The present method is to speed up the process by boiling. After bits of leaves and dirt have settled out, the transparent liquid is poured into a great copper cauldron with a capacity of 40 to 50 gallons, and a wood fire is lighted under it. After 12 to 14 hours of continuous boiling and stirring it becomes pitch black and completely opaque.

It is then ladled into paper-lined boxes, and when cool is the consistency of warm asphalt. The boxes, weighing 125 pounds, are wrapped in burlap and cart-

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